

CONVOCATION ADDRESS

... *by* ...

JOHN STEWART BRYAN

President of the College of William and Mary

... *in* ...

PHI BETA KAPPA HALL

SEPTEMBER 22, 1936



WILLIAMSBURG, VIRGINIA

1936

Entered at the Post Office at Williamsburg, Virginia, July 3, 1926, under act
of August 24, 1912, as second-class matter.
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CONVOCATION, COLLEGE OF WILLIAM AND MARY

WILLIAMSBURG, SEPTEMBER 22, 1936

Here we are, assembled for the two hundred and forty-fourth year in the life of this imperishable institution. We love, and naturally, to dramatize days and dates. That is why we attach so much importance to birthdays and other anniversaries. That is why this day is always unique, for it symbolizes in the present the glamor, the struggle, the setbacks, the glory and the unconquerable triumph that life alone can offer. The coming of the entering class, and for that matter the continuance of the other classes, the presence of the professors, the existence of the buildings and all the other pomp and panoply of this College are essentially only the outer and transitory trappings of life itself. It is good to have the chance to come here, but for those who come and those who stay away, for those who have this opportunity, and for those who do not, the great essential fact is unchanged, and that fact is the existence of human personalities in the face of the old, old problem, "How to live." For certainly we are as inexorably condemned to life as we are to death, but there is this vast difference, that life has prizes, achievements, crowns and rewards, which the living may see; while the rewards of death—except for liberation—are not yet manifest.

Now, in coming here you are presumably seeking the way to a richer, larger life; you are dedicating four years—an immense percentage of your disposable time—to equipping yourselves for a specific task. Why should you do this? Who will care twenty years from now whether you went to college or not? Who will note on the streets and in the market place whether you made the dean's list or received a Phi Beta Kappa? Will the gates swing wide and the crowds stand back in 1960 for the champion athlete, or the captain of an unbeatable team, as in 1936-37? Well, when President Conant, of Harvard, came down here last June he did not even recall the name of Harvard's great captain in 1922. So I fancy the world at large will not do much better. Nor do the glories of scholarship,

which end in the senior class, shine eternally. The fact that you were the best debater or orator or essayist at college when you were twenty-one does not necessarily mean that you will have power, position or place when you are fifty; for the world rewards the men and women of fifty solely by the standard of what those men and women have done between now and then, and not by the standard of the promise they showed a generation ago.

No one can compute the multitude of careers that lie hidden but possible in the life of a new-born babe. Those potentialities, however, must be reduced day by day and choice by choice as each child, or youth, or adult turns to the right or left, or, leaving unexplored the alluring fields on either hand, marches straight forward, and even for the wisest, the strongest, and the most far-seeing "time and chance happeneth to all men."

Now, you are all here with the same purpose, no matter under what multitudinous forms that ideal may be disguised. That aim, that purpose and that prize is success—success and achievement and recognition and satisfaction in its fullest sense. It is not in the power of any college to guarantee that consummation. No degree conferred by William and Mary will guarantee its holder a job, and no job—not even being born a king—is guarantee of wealth, power, happiness and lasting joy. Look at William II, Alphonso XIII, Haile Selassie, for example, and consider who they were and what they are.

I know graduates of great engineering, law, medical and theological schools who are down and out. The world and Fate demand resilience, initiative, adaptiveness which ordinary colleges can only determine in the most hazy way—and can even less presume to teach.

Will knowledge of the qualities of prime numbers give a statesman knowledge of prime requisites for national welfare? Because a student acquires unique skill in handling test tubes, does that prove or even indicate that he will know how to handle trial or temptation? Does knowledge of language give wisdom in matters of life? The greatest opportunity offered any king for untangling the affairs of a distraught nation was presented to Louis XVI, and though he was a

very skilful locksmith, he could not open the door of hope and freedom and good government for France.

What the colleges offer is training in history, in literature, in mathematics and in science; but proficiency in none of these intellectual pursuits promises character, judgment, stability in dealing with the manifold changes and chances of life. The accumulation of facts gives in itself no accumulation of force for grave decisions. Facts are useful, indeed essential. All the courage on earth—the courage, for example, that will nerve an Auracanian Indian to go into the jungle after a jaguar with only a knife, will not suffice to adjust a carburetor, or make a three point landing. You know as well as I that there are spiritual qualities, or, shall we say, human qualities, that raise their fortunate possessor above all mere professors or pundits whatsoever.

It was not knowledge alone that enabled Lloyd George to inspire and lead a war-sick nation to victory. It was a tingling, springing, vitalizing courage—something that cannot be learned by rote, or acquired by cramming for an examination. He had meat to eat that men know not of.

We know of General Lee's military genius, but it was not even the possession of that rare and dazzling quality that set him over and apart from his people. It was his fortitude—not the fortitude of a stubborn animal, but the force and strength that only religion in its highest forms can give. For General Lee came to his conclusions by insight, and supported them of necessity, for "he endured as seeing Him who is invisible." He had stepped beyond the bounds of matter and things that can be weighed and measured, and had entered into communion with those dimly descried facts and forces that well up in the hearts of men. His strength and his ever-widening influence flow not from his victories on the field of battle, but from his victories over himself, over hate, weakness, selfishness, slackness, and his power over his fellowmen springs from the proof of his power over himself.

Oh, do not believe for one moment that the prizes and acclaim and crown and triumph of life are attainable except by the pure in heart. It is not only the great souls of all time who proclaim this; the inexorable laws of nature proclaim it also.

Can you recall a time in all history when the world was in more need of guidance? We have created wealth-producing machinery, and by that machinery we have been enslaved; we have sought science as a path to peace, and walking in that path we have found the way of doubt, disillusionment and sorrow. We are fools and blind if we cannot see that the destiny of man lies elsewhere than in the laboratory, the machine shop, and the stock market. These mechanisms are important and useful servants, but they are cruel, deceitful and hopeless masters.

The men who made this College had their aims higher than the market place, and because they looked beyond profits they laid hold on power. To come to William and Mary is to choose with purpose an environment and a tradition of vision coupled with attainment. Here came men with undreamed of capabilities, and here those powers were awakened and turned to vast enterprises. Never forget that the men who created this nation laid the foundation and set the background for the material prosperity that developed later. It was freedom to plan, to labor, to build, to expand, to exploit that brought to us the industrial leadership of the world. But the creation of this vast fabric of wealth and industry was only a framework for the development of life; it was not life itself.

At Cuzco in Peru still stands the most massive, dominant and unexplainable mass of masonry in the world. Nothing in Egypt, not the Pyramids, not the great red sandstone statue of Pharaoh across the Nile from Luxor, compares with the skill or immensity of the vast fortifications these vanished Indians reared. The great wall of China, the vast temple at Baalbek are mere playthings side by side with these physical protections against change. And yet, change came and destroyed that civilization so completely that only its meaningless ruins are left.

Now, why could not these walls save the South American Indians from the Spanish? Or, rather, why were these defenses in themselves the cause of the utter destruction of the people who built them? I will tell you, and the answer is as vital and as true today as then. The Indians had lost the power of adaptation; they thought that their walls were safe from any assault; they never imagined

gunpowder or horses, and they had *deliberately* and *effectively* destroyed the capacity for new methods in the face of new conditions.

Can we not put it this way, and put it truly: They had tried to capture the spirit of man and confine it forever in a stone fortress; they sought to prevent growth and change without seeing that thereby they were preventing life itself. Of their civilization, with its gold and silver, its statuary and its marvelous weaving, its vast works for irrigation, with the consequent abundance of food and comfort, these people had built for themselves everything but freedom. Failing that, they failed in all.

Nothing is easier than to compare ourselves with other peoples and see their mistakes, as we do in this case, but remember that nothing is more difficult than to profit by what we see. It may well be that some Asiatic or Indian tourist may see the wreckage of Boulder Dam, or the Tennessee Valley Project, or the abutments of the Triborough Bridge, or the foundation of the Capitol at Washington, and going back to Kashgan or Cuzco may philosophize upon the breaking down of our civilization, too. At least we have this advantage, however, over Egypt, Knossos, Cuzco and whatnot, namely, we know that we can be destroyed, and we know where the real danger lies; that danger has ever been blindness and cowardice—blindness to the right road, cowardice to face hardships and change.

History at large, and our history in particular, is just a marvelous kaleidoscope of change and new adaptations. There have always been timid men looking to the past and fearing to move one little step forward. And there have always been wild men, who in reaching for the bubble of supreme perfection would abandon every gain achieved by their fathers. To follow either leader is to be lost; to hold to either theory is to perish. Between these two extremists stand the men who represent the ideals, the methods, and the spirit of William and Mary men. Those principles and practices brought this nation into being; they gave its hopes a form and shape in the Constitution; they gave its early beginnings direction and character under Thomas Jefferson and James Monroe. Such achievements do not come by chance. The driving power that was able to bring about such changes and attain such ends was itself a slowly developing force; it sprung from a rare combination of vision and

courage. The men who broke away from English rule deliberately chose to turn their backs on the sacred past and their swords on the established rulers. Faced by a grim alternative, they did not hesitate where to go and what to do. They could and did appraise the worth of England's gains for human freedom and for self-government; but they were not deceived into believing that the end of those gains had been reached and that no further progress could be made. So they were classed as radicals by the Rockinghams and Norths, the stand-patters of that age.

Likewise they knew that the new Jerusalem in political government was very, very new, and that human nature was very old and hard to change. So they were cautious about proclaiming the glad tidings that the Townsend plan of that period would bring wealth, peace, joy, spiritual advancement to everybody, everywhere, and at once. Such timidity naturally marked them as reactionaries whose greed for private property drowned out all will to serve the larger needs of mankind. What is this but to say that in every crisis it will always be true that

"Those behind cried forward,
And those in front cried back."

But the men who dominate the situation are the men who know what to keep of the past and what to seek in the future. This knowledge is not book learning; its formularies are not set down; there is no set of examination papers for those who want to prepare to meet the multitudinous demands of life. Only in the slow and steadfast schooling of the spirit can any sense of foundation be laid. It was the habit of self-control, it was the practice of self-denial, it was the reaction to courage that qualified our great alumni for the performance of their great task.

It needs no words from me to make you realize that in our day, too, we have come to the valley of decision. There are those who cry "Away with the Supreme Court, abolish the constitution, enthroned Congress as the living voice of the people, which is the voice of God." And there are those who believe in and proclaim rights of contract, rights of private property, security of vested interests that take no note of and feel no care for any play of humanity—or even

that public welfare which must ever supersede the welfare of the individual if society is to survive.

Where, in such a case, does William and Mary stand? To what goal we do as students of William and Mary look? And with what hope or expectation can the people of Virginia, or the nation, look to us?

For be assured that not since 1776 have such magnificent rewards of fame and honor and power and blessing awaited the wise leaders of this country as those which now attend the right solution of these problems.

Oh! train yourselves by restraint and discipline, by mastering your own bodies and directing your minds in the firm certainty that it is only to and by such that light and leading can come. Oh! fit yourselves for the high task of leadership by cultivating the seeing eye and strengthening the unselfish purpose. So, and so only, shall you walk in the way and find the door that opens to peace and power and the right to be leader of all by being servant of all. For now, as one hundred and sixty years ago, William and Mary can once more display the life-giving truth that this College showed in the Revolution.

The discipline of the citizens' spirit is the dynamic of public service.

In that faith, and consecrated to that ideal, begin this session, and go forth to a great destiny.

